

CPL poll on abortion angers many physicians

Patrick Sullivan

A recent survey of physicians' opinions about abortion is proving to be almost as controversial as the abortion issue itself.

The poll, which cost about \$30 000 to conduct, was mailed to approximately 50 000 doctors in August by an antiabortion organization called Canadian Physicians for Life (CPL). The two-page, 17-question survey was accompanied by a letter signed by six CPL members. CPL also launched a major public-relations blitz, holding news conferences in several cities to coincide with the start of the CMA annual meeting, held in Quebec City Aug. 21 to 23.

By mid-August both *CMAJ* and the CMA had begun receiving letters critical of the poll. "This is not a survey, this is a propaganda piece", stated Dr. Michael Klein, a professor of family medicine at McGill University, in a letter to CPL. He sent a copy to *CMAJ*.

Klein also criticized the CMA for selling CPL the mailing list that allowed it to conduct the poll. (A CPL request to include the poll in the July 15 issue of *CMAJ* was turned down.)

Asked about criticism of that sale, Joe Chouinard, the CMA's director of corporate affairs, responded: "I hear you, but re-



"The CMA is intent on establishing a utilitarian ethic of medicine."

— Dr. Colin Merry

member that CPL could simply have turned around and bought a list somewhere else. And also remember that there's a question of legality here. If you are in the business of selling lists, and the CMA has been marketing its Masterfile list as the most accurate one in Canada, then you had better be able to offer a pretty good reason for refusing to sell it."

Chouinard stressed that CPL did not purchase the CMA membership list, which is not for sale, but bought part of the Masterfile listing of all Canadian physicians that the association maintains for manpower-planning purposes. "Obviously, both members and nonmembers can be on that list", he said. "But I do want to make

clear that the CMA is not involved with this poll in any way. We did not sponsor it. We did not endorse it. It is not being conducted on our behalf."

For his part, Dr. Colin Merry, the president of CPL, launched a harsh attack on the CMA, accusing it of "being intent on establishing a utilitarian ethic of medicine". He said he is no longer a CMA member because of this.

A CPL press release said its poll results show that the CMA executive "has lost its credibility" and that the abortion policy adopted by General Council last year does not represent the feelings of Canadian doctors. Basically, that policy states that "the decision to perform an induced

Patrick Sullivan is CMAJ news and features editor.

Little variation in number of abortions, StatsCan figures indicate

The number of abortions being performed in Canada appears to be remaining relatively consistent, figures released by Statistics Canada indicate. In 1987, the last year for which statistics are available, 63 662 abortions were carried out, up slightly from the 63 508 performed in 1986. The highest number recorded since reporting began in 1970 is the 66 319 abortions that took place in 1982.

The Yukon had the highest abortion rate in 1987, 29.9 abortions per 100 live births.

Prince Edward Island had the lowest rate, 1.8, while the national average was 17.2, up slightly from 17.0 in 1986. In 1987 Canada's doctors were still governed by the abortion law adopted in 1969 that allowed abortions to take place in accredited or approved hospitals as long as a committee of three doctors certified that a woman's life or health could be jeopardized by continuation of the pregnancy.

That law was struck down by the Supreme Court of Canada in January 1988.

abortion is a medical one, made confidentially between the patient and her physician within the confines of existing Canadian law. The decision is made after conscientious examination of all other options". CPL said early poll results showed that 68% of respondents felt the policy favoured "abortion on request, yet only 28% feel that abortion should be legal in all circumstances".

However, several physicians who wrote to *CMAJ* rejected such results, and claimed that the CPL survey was biased. "This particular survey, regardless of what information is produced, will be of no value in assessing a sensitive and highly important issue", wrote Klein, who argued that almost half of the questions were "loaded" and designed to get a response that CPL wanted. "In fact, it is likely to inflame an already inflamed situation, leading to less clear thinking on an already clouded question. I am embarrassed by the behaviour of those colleagues who have produced this document."

A less angry, though equally critical, letter was sent by Dr. Peter Wagner of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Calgary. He said that CPL makes a "quite reasonable argument" that CMA members should be allowed to have their views reflected in as-

sociation policy statements, but adds: "I was therefore dismayed by the gross bias of the accompanying multiple-choice questionnaire. All the questions pertained to the rights of the fetus. What I find offensive is the absolute lack of questions pertaining to the rights of the mother."

Magner added that the fetal-rights issue deserves discussion, even if such rights have not been legally defined, and also stated: "That a woman should have the right to control her own body is without question."

Like Klein, Magner said results of the CPL poll "have no validity" and should be ignored. "The whole abortion issue revolves around the conflict between fetal and maternal rights. This questionnaire, in not allowing any expression of opinion on the latter, in no way allows free expression of my views on the abortion question."

Dr. Morton Rapp of Willowdale, Ont., reached the same conclusion as Klein and Magner, but for different reasons. He said the survey faces a "high risk" of generating biased responses "because it is distributed by a group with a bias in the issue". He also criticized the appeal for funds that accompanied the survey, stating that this "totally contaminates the survey as a useful instrument".

Rapp also thinks CPL overstates the importance of physician input in the abortion debate. "Furthermore, putting out one's own survey is just a bit like the situation of an adolescent who asks his/her parents if he/she is cute."

Doug Geekie, the CMA's director of communications and government relations, said the association had received 40 to 50 letters concerning the poll by late August, and most urged it to ignore poll results and to confirm the policy adopted a year ago.

Merry, a Winnipeg pathologist, rejected criticism of the poll. He told *CMAJ* that "all options were considered in the survey". He also said that his organization decided to conduct the poll because "we were approached by CMA members who said they wanted a referendum — they said they had been given no chance to express their views".

Merry said CPL is pleased with the response rate — he said it stood at 16% at the end of August, while DataCore, the BC company that tabulated results, had predicted a return rate of only 5%.

"We had some surprises", he said. "Even some of the people who were pro-abortion sent us money — maybe it was the novelty of CMA members being asked for their opinion. We were also surprised that 3% of respondents felt that the 'wrong sex' is an indication for abortion. That 3% is a sufficient number for abortion by sex to become a reality."

Merry described the response of the CMA's General Council to three abortion-related resolutions presented at the annual meeting as "interesting". One called on the CMA to recognize that many members disagree with the abortion policy adopted in 1988, but it was rejected by a large majority because most delegates felt it was meaningless. However, Merry did not.

"They voted down a matter of fact", he said. "Apparently General Council is not able to believe that anyone disagrees with its decisions." ■